

## Is Moscow better than Sydney?

Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzulkifli Abd Razak

Comment

New Sunday Times - 09/26/2010

"IF scientists can genetically modify food and NASA can send missions to Mars, politicians must be able to find resources to get millions of children into school and change the prospects of a generation of children," said Global Campaign for Education president Kailash Satyarthi.

And I add: "Educators must want to educate for the sake of saving humanity!"

Why is this important? It is because "humanity" has lost its currency in the realm of today's education with a system anchored on human capital, and less on human being, if at all.

Consequently, we think we are "educated" but we remain short of being humane which explains the state we are in today, socially speaking at least.

Meanwhile, institutions of learning are quickly transformed into somewhat production houses (if not sweatshops) keen on generating more wealth instead of well-being. The correlation of wealth with well-being is wanting to say the least.

So when we are confronted with the reality that one in four children under the age of five in the world are underweight, mainly because of lack of quality food, inadequate water, sanitation and health services, and poor care and feeding practices due to poverty, we find that the education system is not responsive enough.

The human capital that we generate is oblivious to this. After all, human capital that is geared to being the "best" is not necessarily linked to the problems of humanity.

So we spend much time feathering our own nest, and more recently bordering on being greedy and unethical. Unfortunately, many came from the "best" of institutions listed in the recent Times Higher Education (THE) league table.

So while we spend most of our time strategising to fit into the said rankings, we have little left to realise that the "real" world is concerned about how to save almost 70 million children who are out of school, especially among those ranked as the world's 60 poorest nations. Many may not even have a tertiary institution.

So it is not surprising that "humanity" is not a valued criterion in the rankings "game".

And this cannot be more apparent than in a recent analysis published by researchers at the Department of Organizational Leadership, Policy and Development, University of Minnesota in the United States.

Based on the Berlin Principles on Ranking of Higher Education Institutions, founded by an expert group associated with UNESCO Europe, which are used as benchmarks, the researchers ranked 25 higher education ranking systems in the continent.

Also included in this report is THE World University Rankings, which Malaysians are familiar with. The rest are more national in character covering mainly European countries.

That said, the THE league table is reported as among the least congruent with the Berlin Principles. It scored just above the lowest at 2.25, and is placed at No. 24 of the 25 listed.

It is not the most preferred system as far as the Berlin Principles are concerned. In fact the trend analysis showed that the rankings exercise involving the "for-profit news outlets" - daily, weekly and monthly newspapers or magazines - seems to fare rather poorly overall. There are 17 out of the 25; and nine scored less than 3.0. In all, more than half scored likewise.

In contrast, those compiled and published by "non-profit research entities seem to perform better" overall. The top three are of this entity, with 3.90 and 3.75 points, done by the specialised and appropriate German, Austrian and Swiss authorities.

Their methodologies are assessed as "above-average" and least flawed as one goes down the list.

To quote the University College of London president Malcolm Grant in The Guardian, UK, last week: "Imagine a newspaper decided to create a table ranking the world's cities. Is Moscow better than Sydney? Would Hong Kong squeeze in above Manchester? Or Bangkok above Brighton? It would be a nonsensical exercise. Better in what respect? They are all vastly different types of human settlement, meeting different aspects of human need in different cultures and climates."

He very much summarised the case for universities around the world, saying that such rankings are now "seriously overreaching themselves". In fact, he was noted to have remarked that world rankings of universities are "worthless" because they cannot possibly capture the institutional diversity.

Indeed, this is where the major downside of rankings seems to be when it insisted on a one-size-fits-all mindset.

This is done by placing a defined set of criteria (often with no consultation) and scales that are controversial given the socio-political and cultural as well as educational context. It is therefore not surprising that the study noted "no single" rankers listed "excelled in the area of methodology".

Moreover, the issue of the extent it is truly "attributable to differences in aim, higher education systems and cultures, and the availability of data" is still unresolved.

But this is overshadowed by the planned media blitz that positioned the exercise as "seemingly unquestioned tools for accessing quality". To be sure, the rankings exercise as it stands today is more akin to pseudo-science that has duped many.

Grant nailed it when he said: "Global rankings have afforded annual light entertainment, but they are now seriously overreaching themselves. They do a disservice if they influence student choice, or come to be treated as a performance measure by the leaders of hugely diverse institutions." It is tragic when the performance measure does not factor in "humanity".

\* The writer is the Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Sains Malaysia. He can be contacted at [vc@usm.my](mailto:vc@usm.my)  
[Terms & Conditions](#)